

Chris Sailer Kicking & Rubio Long Snapping

Featured Article

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No Punter Left Behind: How One Guru Made The Art Of Kicking A Science

BY MIKE PIELLUCCI

It's just past noon on Oscar Sunday and Chris Sailer is leading film study in a creaky, sun-drenched auditorium in the bowels of Notre Dame High School's Spanish-style campus in Sherman Oaks, Calif.

The former UCLA All-American sits in the front row, laser pointer in one hand, camcorder in the other. He's breaking down the tape of one of his more recent proteges, a place kicker named Andre Heidari, two frames at a time for a throng of high school kickers and punters and their parents.

Heidari's form is perfect. His stance is compact and coiled, yet retains enough athleticism for him to explode through the point of impact. His plant foot lands even with the football as he strikes with his kicking leg, his counter arm pointing straight down in order to curtail wasted motion. Never, at any point, does his eye line deviate from the ball's sweet spot. After a few playbacks, Sailer explains to his audience how that stroke, honed through years under his tutelage, earned Heidari a full scholarship to USC and made him a freshman All-American in 2011. The pitch is implicit: With enough work and with my help, you can become the next Andre Heidari.

"Your film," he assures everyone in the room, "will not be this pretty."

Sailer is maybe 5'10" on a good day, with a buzz cut and a wisp of stubble on his chin; he could pass for a caricature of the diminutive kicker if it weren't for a pair of calves the size of oil drums. ("Popeye legs," one parent calls them.) At 36, he comes off more as an older brother than someone twice the players' age, which perhaps best explains how he's channeled his pointed analysis into a recruiting oligarchy known as Chris Sailer Kicking, a one-stop shop in special teams recruitment that puts on coaching clinics across the nation, ranks players, and offers private lessons and recruiting advice. Along with business partner Chris Rubio, his long snapper at UCLA, he's reinvented special teams recruiting by convincing prideful teenagers to listen to things they don't want to hear.

"You're going to get an honest evaluation," Sailer says, "because I want our kickers to get scholarships. So if I lie to make you happy, and you go in and you fail, this whole thing has failed."

On this day alone, 100 kids have signed up at \$325 a head to hear just how far away they are from where they want to be. For the next two hours, Sailer will comb through each kicker and punter's film in astonishing detail, addressing every player by their first name while dispensing gentle yet forthright critiques. He makes it a point to single out something positive in all of them, even the scrawny freshman whose daisy cutter couldn't have traveled more than 15 yards downfield. Odds are he'll be back; an overwhelming percentage of Sailer's clients return to the program, and many of his most elite players work with him for their entire high school and college careers.

They do so for good reason. Sailer estimates that he now works, at one point or another, with 90 percent of the kickers and punters that sign with a power conference school each season; more than 800 of his and Rubio's specialists played college football in 2012 alone. Thirteen of his alumni are the primary kicker or punter for an NFL team. It's all the more impressive given that Sailer has only been in business full time since 2003, and didn't master his technical teachings for some time after that. Blair Walsh, the Minnesota Vikings kicker who made the NFL's All-Pro team and set five league records as a rookie, is a Sailer product. So too is his draft classmate Bryan Anger, the Jacksonville Jaguars punter who drew incredulous stares when he was selected 70th overall in 2012, higher than any punter in 17 years. This season, Sailer products Dustin Hopkins and Jeff Locke, the first kicker and punter, respectively, chosen in this year's draft, have joined the ranks.

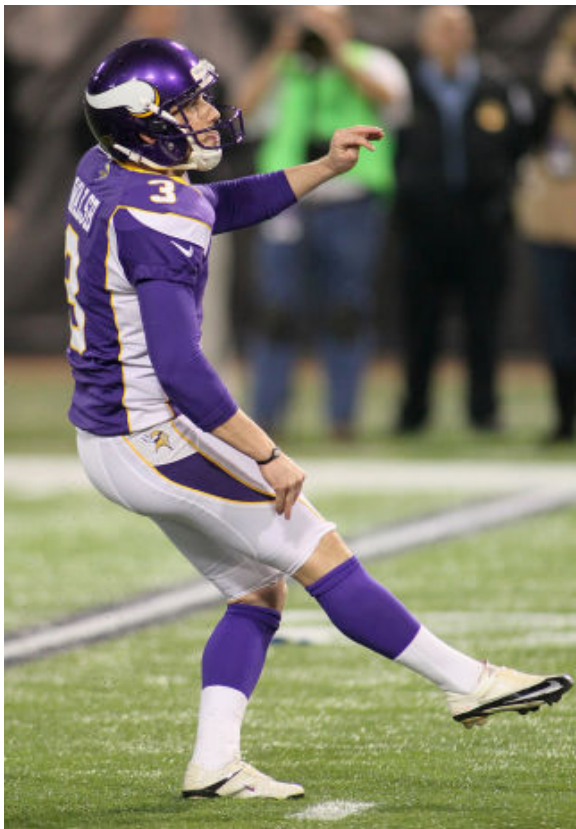


"They have the market cornered," says Greg Biggins, a national recruiting analyst for Scout.com, the recruiting arm of Fox Sports. "It's pretty much a monopoly for them."

The word "monopoly" is weighty enough on its own, but carries added significance in the incestuous world of high school recruiting. The work of classifying and showcasing high school athletes is a billion-dollar business, with Fox Sports (Scout), CBS Sports (247Sports), and Yahoo Sports (Rivals.com) all heavily invested. (Necessary disclosure: After this piece was filed, I accepted a position with 247Sports.) To log on to any of their sites is to prowling along a rolling sierra of rankings, highlight tapes, message boards, and team-focused websites, all powered by an army of largely interchangeable analysts whose constant movement from one employer to the next leaves many of them looking pretty much the same.

A glut of position-specific gurus is the natural outcome, each selling the promise of improvement and also exposure—to the recruiting services, to elite All-Star games, to schools. Sailer is one of them, but also something more, a figure who's made himself entirely necessary not just to the recruiting sites who report on his camps and ask for his help with their rankings, but to powerful coaches who trust and depend on his evaluations, and view him more as a partner than a promoter.

All of this raises a simple question: How did Chris Sailer carve out such an enormous market share within the ultimate copycat business? The answer to that is only partly about kicking footballs. It also has a lot to do with how America has decided to train its youth.



Blair Walsh, the Minnesota Vikings kicker, has a fairly simple explanation for Sailer's success: He got there before his competitors did.

"They can't be the first one like him," he says. "He started the whole recruitment of the position as a scholarship position."

That Sailer did so was, by his own admission, dumb luck. He was at the end of an All-American career as both a kicker and punter in 1999 when his high school coach at Notre Dame, Kevin Rooney, asked for help tutoring one of the team's younger kickers, a 15-year-old named Nick Folk. Like many kickers, Sailer included, Folk came from a soccer background and had designs on playing the game in college. Football was just something he happened to be good at.

Sailer had other ideas. In Folk, he had stumbled upon a prototypical college kicker, one who stood 6'1" and had a thunderous right leg. He told Rooney that Folk was worthy of a scholarship and made it his mission to find him one. This suited Folk fine, since he preferred a full scholarship in football to a partial one in soccer.

The problem had to do with how recruiting operated at the time. This was just before the Internet would make players in backwater towns, once doomed to be forgotten, a certain kind of famous, with coaches eager to recruit them and Rivals, Scout, and MaxPreps ready to turn them into attention-grabbing content. Players, in particular special team players with little positional value, had few ways to get the attention of coaches, and with coaches rarely able to see kickers in person, they relied on rudimentary statistics like makes, attempts, and distance. The data, though, revealed only a fraction of a player's true value, given the variables that could influence them: climate, field conditions, the caliber of their team's offense and, most crucially, whether or not the kicker opted to kick off a block, which is legal in high school football.

College football coaches, unlike their brethren in the professional baseball ranks, were hardly unaware that they were working with bad numbers. They were, if anything, perhaps too aware of it; just a few kickers and punters across the country were offered scholarships each year, in order to minimize risk. Sailer was one of the lucky few when he graduated in 1995, mainly because he'd drilled 22 field goals during his senior season, including seven from 50 or more yards. It didn't matter that he kicked off a block his entire high school career; the sheer mass of his body of work made him a high school All-American and, consequently, impossible to ignore.

Folk wasn't so lucky. Because Rooney wanted to give his upper classmen their own opportunities at exposure, Folk didn't become Notre Dame's primary field goal kicker until his senior season, and thus ended his high school career with just nine attempts. Predictably enough, when Sailer began to stump for a scholarship, he got nothing but grief.

"I started calling anyone that I knew—people I met at All-American functions, All-Star games, even guys that recruited me when I came out of school—and said 'I've got this kid Nick Folk, you gotta give him a scholarship,'" Sailer says. "They said, 'Absolutely not. He was what, 4-for-7? We can't do that.' Even UCLA, my alma mater, didn't listen. As it went on, I said: 'Man, this is ridiculous. Why is it that every other position like quarterbacks and receivers have it set whereas kickers and punters don't?'"

Arizona eventually came through with an offer, which Folk jumped on en route to an NFL career with the Dallas Cowboys and the New York Jets. The longer the process dragged on, though, the more Sailer heard a refrain from coaches that validated what he suspected all along: When it came to recruiting kickers and punters, they had no idea what they were doing.

"They said 'Chris, you've got to create something where we can see these guys,'" Sailer says. "'Otherwise, we're not giving scholarships. So if you want to be the guy who does it, we'll start to listen.'"

And so the idea that would become Chris Sailer Kicking was born.

"It was the coaches' idea," he says. "I never thought to go to that level. I only saw that there was a need for these guys to have someone, in a sense, represent them."

Over the next four years, while kicking in the Arena Football League, Sailer ran small camps and gave private lessons. He took losses on camps and worked to build up a client list through word of mouth, in preparation for the moment when the business would be ready to turn a profit rather than relying on his AFL salary for funding. Then, and only then, would he implement an idea that had for some time been running not just through his mind, but through those of the college coaches: the first ever national recruiting camp for high school kickers and punters.

"I knew that was a necessary step to get them the exposure to get scholarships," he says. "It's not just recruitment film. It's not just a statistic off a two-inch block or kicking in Chicago in the snow versus kicking in California in the beautiful weather."

By 2003, he believed he had enough name recognition to launch the event. He settled on Las Vegas as the venue and made the camp open enrollment in order to boost attendance as high as possible, relying on his coaching contacts to spread the word in areas his own Rolodex couldn't reach. In the end, 125 kickers and punters signed up to compete in front of coaches from 30 Division FBS schools. He wasn't satisfied with the funds on hand, though, and so he took out a bank loan to fund the camp. After four years of preparation, his chance to convince colleges of both his and two entire positions' worth had finally arrived. It

felt more like an ultimatum than an opportunity.

"All of those camps I ran and put time and effort into, it was to create one camp where we'd make a profit," he says. "If it didn't work, I'm not doing this, that's for sure. There's no way."

While the stakes themselves made the event daunting, Sailer's role made it more so. He not only had to lead drills, but also get a clear evaluation of each player, so he could make recommendations to the coaches on hand. In many ways, it was an impossible demand: How could he project which players would have a successful college career based on one day's worth of incomplete data? With his finances and reputation at stake, Sailer made the crucial decision to recommend only players he was certain could succeed in college, and ignore the final scholarship tally altogether. It was a calculated risk. It lowered the immediate potential of the event he poured all of his resources into, but also ensured its survival.

"If a college coach doesn't trust you, you're done. I really made sure these are guys," he says, hammering the last word. "If they weren't guys, we weren't recommending them. So although I probably could have gotten more scholarships up front, I didn't do so."

Even with that self-imposed restraint—an example of the kind of discipline he identifies as the key to his success—Sailer wound up recommending 10 players, who received scholarships on the spot. While it was a fraction of the camp's total attendance, and a much lower figure than in later years, it was also a huge success: In one day, Sailer had more than doubled the number of scholarships given to all the kickers and punters in his entire high school graduating class. When they all made good on his guarantee and enjoyed productive college careers, it bought him even more credibility, and turned the Vegas camp into his signature event. The open enrollment is now capped at 300 participants and has become so popular that it's held twice a year, once in January in the waning weeks before National Signing Day and once in April to showcase his best junior prospects.

Sailer's success was in some ways over determined. He was first on the scene, and had the connections, technical skills, and, crucially, the discipline to take advantage of the position. He should have done well. His greatest advantage, though, may have been timing. By coming not just first, but right at the cusp of the Internet recruiting boom, Sailer enjoyed a kind of exposure that was previously impossible, and would be extraordinarily difficult to match in today's saturated marketplace.

His timing was also coincident with broader trends, the most important being the rise of private tutoring. America's increasing stratification on lines of class and income has had a knock-on effect in academia, with elite colleges competing to

implement ever more restrictive admissions standards, turning education into a sort of game that only part of the public is even aware of. The way to play is to pay for private, supplemental schooling, whether it's meant to correct for inadequate primary education – NPR makes a strong case that the 2001 passage of the No Child Left Behind Act was the best thing that ever happened to the tutoring industry—or further hone an already acute edge. Whatever the case, we've wound up with an industry that less supports our educational system than feeds off of its failures. Going above and beyond is the new baseline.

These developments fit Sailer fine. The buzz from that first Las Vegas camp established the basic model for the business he runs today. Coaches loved the idea of a one-stop shop where they could drop in, get a kicker, and be done worrying about it. Kickers and punters reported home from the camp, thrilled, and soon enough high school coaches from around the country were asking him to hold camps at their schools, giving him access to key talent-producing regions.

All Sailer needed for a camp was the right city, a turf field and classroom space for film study. It eventually set in its current format of three camps per year in five distinct locations: Los Angeles, Dallas, Chicago, Atlanta, and Charlotte.

Video link: <http://youtu.be/OVcn-caK1AU>

VIDEO: Donny Hageman, 2013 "Top 12" & Event Elite Camp

That same year, Arizona State became the first team to tap him to run a summer special teams camp, an indicator that college programs had begun to respect his drawing power in addition to his scouting eye. Sailer suddenly had more lucrative camp opportunities than he had time in the AFL offseason and so he gave up kicking in order to run his business full time, traversing the United States to train and evaluate special teams players.

It wasn't long before he gathered enough information to construct his inaugural set of recruiting rankings for kickers and punters. He was, as always, judicious. While the recruiting sites tend to assign a number of some sort to any player they evaluate, Sailer ranks only players he thinks have college potential, with five stars denoting a Division I prospect, four stars a Division II one, and three stars a Division III-caliber player. The rankings fixed him both as the lord of the growing niche market and the fulcrum supporting it.

"Coaches would say, 'Do you put your stamp of approval on him? We want you to basically put your job on the line to prove this guy,'" Sailer says. "And I said, Yeah, I'm willing to.' That's what basically got me to where I am."

"I know if Chris tells me something about a player, it's going to be true," says USC special teams coach John Baxter.

The biggest move of all, though, came when he enticed Chris Rubio to start up a snapping program, something that was inconceivable when Sailer flew out Rubio, then teaching sixth-grade history in Covina, Calif., to the inaugural Vegas camp to help him train a group of snappers on hand to simulate live conditions for the kickers and punters who were actually getting evaluated. It was an afterthought, because snappers simply didn't get scholarships—until one of Rubio's students, a Santa Ana product named Will Collins, performed well enough to accomplish exactly that, earning a full ride from USC.



"That was the first kid we could think of that got a scholarship, and he got it from the camp," Sailer says. "So I said to Rubio, 'Dude, we gotta do something here.'"

Rubio was interested enough to help out at camps and build his own client list on the side, doing much of what Sailer had four years earlier until he was eventually able to quit teaching in 2007 to focus on Rubio Long Snapping and run camps as Sailer's full-time partner, the Teller to his Penn. ("We're not solving rocket science here," says Rubio. "You're snapping a dead animal, really fast, backwards.") While the parent business is still under Sailer's name, they distribute the signup fee from each player to the respective position coach, creating a basically even split of the profits. Who knows whether the arrangement would work with two men who didn't enjoy a relationship dating back to college days when one was snapping field goal attempts to the other, but they do, and it does, and it sets a necessary tone of cooperation.

"You need a good snapper to have a good kicker, especially in recruiting," says Sailer. "So we've shown, 'Hey, we're the example, take our lead and follow it.'"

Everything that followed that first Las Vegas camp—the regional camps, the college camps, the rankings, the partnership with Rubio—put Sailer far enough

ahead on a curve that by the time the eventual competition arrived, it was too late. He and Rubio had become synonymous with their positions, the Xerox or Band-Aids of kicking footballs, able to worry less about survival than about altering the way the football-loving public thinks about their trade.

"It's a culture change," says Rubio, "and a point of pride."

"Last year everyone talked about Andrew Luck, Robert Griffin III, and Russell Wilson," says Sailer. "Let's talk about Blair Walsh and Justin Tucker."

At least according to him, Sailer isn't in the recruiting business. While his website promises "maximum exposure," that guarantee only applies to the players whose talent merit the attention.

"We're a coaching service, not a recruiting company," he insists. "If I don't believe in you as a player, I don't want to call a coach on your behalf."

The caveat, however, is that all of their players are free to list him and Rubio as references and so they find themselves in daily contact with Division I programs from around the country.

I arrived at Sailer's home in the Burbank Hills at 10 a.m. the Friday after the Notre Dame camp. While signing day is the end of the recruiting cycle for nearly every other position, the weeks after remain a busy season for special teams players.

When Sailer started his company, it was around that time when, with rare exception, the overwhelming majority of his players would get their offers. Some got scholarships; more got preferred walk-on sports. Now there are three main recruiting periods for his Division I-caliber players to get scholarship offers. The first, for elite prospects, comes in the spring and summer of their junior seasons. The second comes in the last month before signing day of their senior season. Finally, there is the traditional post-signing day flurry among schools who have extra roster space available. Sailer figures that 65 to 70 percent of his players fall into the former two categories. When he started, that number "was an absolute zero."

Ruben Guzman, a junior college punter from Riverside, Calif., falls into the last group. A longtime student of Sailer's, he had just received his first scholarship offer, from Wyoming, heading into the L.A. camp after a strong showing at January's Vegas camp. He was planning on taking a trip to Laramie that upcoming weekend to officially sign his letter of intent when Sailer got a call from Hawaii head coach Norm Chow. He needed a punter and knew that Guzman was the last available five-star on Sailer's list. Would Guzman be interested? Sailer then began the delicate dance of working to arrange a marriage between school and athlete, a role in which he's part head hunter and part agent.

"I called Ruben and said, 'I've got Hawaii, what do you think? You've never been to either one.' He says, 'Coach, I like the warm weather.' I told Hawaii 'You've got a problem, because he's got a visit to Wyoming this weekend and they're going to make him sign.' So they offered him, sight unseen and he committed to Hawaii last night. This is something that happens within minutes."

Hawaii got its man, and Guzman got his scholarship, but it put Wyoming, in need of a punter, in a spot. New kickers cross over from soccer every year, resulting in more capable players than there are scholarships. Punters, though, have a unique skill set, and so demand always outpaces supply; while 300 players participate at each Vegas camp, the number who punt exclusively usually tops out around 30. If Wyoming calls Sailer back for a new set of names, he'll provide one but say, as he said to me, that Guzman was the last player he felt comfortable recommending as a Division I player. He could push a name upon them, and likely get another kid a chance to attend college on a full scholarship. That could endanger a coach's trust in the process, though, and the process is bigger than any one player's college ambitions.

"If a college coach calls, our job is to recommend players that are the best—not because you paid, but because you're the best," he says. "If we do a good job recommending, simple: More scholarships. More guys drafted. More money for the guys drafted. More sponsorships."

With each year that the trust remains intact, their clout grows. In the aughts, with Pete Carroll in charge, USC routinely used walk-ons as specialists, with varying degrees of success. In 2011, even facing scholarship reductions, the Trojans signed a top kicker, punter, and long snapper in the same recruiting class, all of them Sailer and Rubio products. It's testament in part to how the recruitment of the position has changed, but also how much faith the program has in what they do.

"It's like a buying a car," says Rubio. "If you go to the dealership and get one, why wouldn't you come back? Oregon, for instance, always take our kickers and snappers. They've already contacted us asking, 'Who is the next one?'"

They can now only ask, instead of see, thanks to a 2009 NCAA rule change that banned coaches from being present at third-party camps. It seemed like a change that would cripple events like the Vegas camp, which began as an in-person showcase for coaches. Instead, according to Biggins, it wound up having the opposite effect.

"It almost helps them even more," he says, "in the sense that you have to trust them, because you can't see the players. Their credibility is already set."

That reputation feeds back to their college camps, now the only chance coaches have to evaluate entire position groups in one sitting the way they used to in Las

Vegas. Predictably enough, it's led to demand from schools for Sailer and Rubio to bring the roadshow their way, and has afforded them the leisure of selecting where they want to business. This year, they've held camps at LSU, Oregon, Washington, Texas A&M, UCLA, and Alabama. That last is where they scored their biggest recruiting coup last summer.

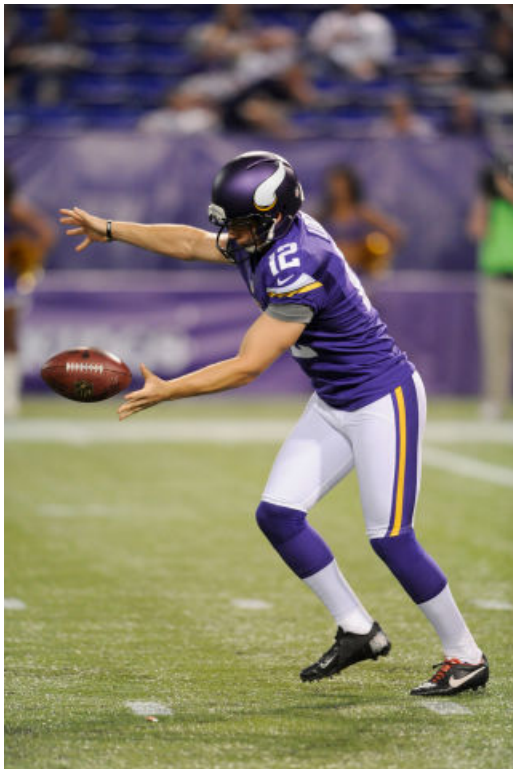
Nick Saban, at the time, was preparing to fill the void senior walk-on Carson Tinker, a Rubio product, would leave after the 2012 season. He was blown away by a kid from Bakersfield, Calif., named Cole Mazza. Mazza, then a UCLA commit, was Rubio's top-ranked player for the 2013 class, and the fastest snapper he had ever timed at the high school level. Saban had never offered a scholarship to a long snapper before and wasn't inclined to start, but Mazza's ability to step in right away intrigued him and brought the most powerful name in college football to the bargaining table.

"He said, 'Do I have to offer?'" recalls Rubio with a laugh. "Yes, if you want him, you will."

"But do I have to?"

"He has other offers. If you want him, you're gonna offer."

And so, a bit reluctantly, Nick Saban offered a scholarship to a long snapper for the first time in his, and Alabama's, history.



Jeff Locke of the Minnesota Vikings, a student of Sailer's since his sophomore year of high school, thinks the reason for his coach's success is technique.

"Chris is a step above everybody else in terms of the consistency in the technique he teaches," says Locke, ESPN's third-ranked punter in April's draft class. "He's taught me so much from watching film to where I can just watch my own film and know what Chris would be thinking."

Locke, in other words, has more or less evolved into his own coach, an objective Sailer set for all of his students and one that he brings up at the very start of the day's film study. The best kickers and punters, he tells them, watch film and do muscle memory drills to enhance their technique much more than they actually kick. To do that, though, they need to first learn what the proper technique is, and that's where Sailer makes his money.

The basic reason Sailer is able to make a living off his particular set of skills is that very few people actually know how to teach them. A kicker or punter's motion comes with so many moving parts that it resembles a golf swing more than any traditional football skill. A rich background in mechanics is needed to understand and troubleshoot that motion when things break down. In theory this is a special teams coach's job, but only a fraction of them understand the nuances of the positions as well as coverages and schemes.

"An offensive line coach was probably an offensive lineman, a defensive backs coach played DB," says Sailer. "Whatever it may be, there's always a coach there to evaluate in recruiting and coach once players get there. With kicking, punting, and long snapping, that's never existed."

There are several potential explanations for that—Sailer points to NCAA-mandated limits on the number of assistant coaches a team retain as a major culprit—but, in the end the neglect comes down to the same issue as the position's recruiting deficiencies: disinterest.

"They believe that position, for whatever odd reason, just wasn't worthy of having a coach being it's only one player," he says, a hint of agitation creeping into his voice.

This is why, however impressive Sailer's business model and recruiting contacts are, none of it would matter if he weren't able to teach the mechanics of the position and understand them well enough to provide reliable evaluations. Debating recruiting exposure versus technical training is an unresolvable, circular argument—the players wouldn't be recruitable without the technique, yet all the technical training in the world is irrelevant without a way to get players scholarships—but it's worth noting, as Sailer does, that a large part of his

success can be traced back to correcting for a lack of knowledge within college programs.

"The history of it showed that this is a walk-on position," he says. "Why? Because there was no evaluator of the position."

There was no equivalent guru during his playing career, so Sailer became a self-taught kicker and punter, largely through trial and error. That took him far enough on its own, but he knew that to develop the best kickers and punters in the nation, his own experience wouldn't be sufficient.

There was no manual, and so he constructed one himself, through incalculable hours in the film room. He was unsure about what to even look for at first, and so he widened the search, poring over film of players at every level of the sport. He eventually discovered patterns, isolating commonalities among the best professional kickers and slowly integrating them into his own methods.

"If there's 32 kickers in the league, I'm asking, 'What are they doing in common?'" he says. "So you look, for example, at the plant foot depth. With the plant foot depth, it's here for 31 of them. This is obvious, we've got to train this. Now how did the plant foot depth get there? 50 other things have to go right for that to take place. So you go to the film. What does their stance look like? Where are they going when they kick? Where is their head situated? Where are their arms?"

Sailer was once again teaching himself by trial and error, a gifted student learning to read by studying the classics. He cross-referenced the NFL kickers with the best technique—Gary Anderson, Morten Andersen, Adam Vinatieri, and maybe his personal favorite, David Akers—against high school kickers, asking himself, Why does the high school player suck? What is he doing wrong that this pro's doing right? What are the differences?

He found the most success by laying images of different kickers over one another and watching them side by side, pinpointing each distinction between them.

"Where's the arm?" he wondered. "Where's the foot? Where's the leg? Where's the hand? Where are the eyes?"

When he found the answers, he went out and taught them. The training has evolved, of course, as both he and the sport have adapted to experience. Nick Folk remembers the early days when Sailer was barely out of college with minimal teaching experience under his belt.

"A lot of it was very basic," he says. "He brought out a big long rope to demonstrate that every kick, no matter where you are on the field, is a straight kick. As a young kicker, you really need to learn that. You pick a target and hit

that target."

Video link: http://youtu.be/a_OYwBKNOAk

VIDEO: Andre Heidari 45 yard Field Goal

Over a decade later, you can see the end of this work in the intricate stride Heidari models on tape. And just as a golfer retains a swing coach, Heidari, like many of Sailer's elite students, continues to take instruction from him. It often comes in the form of an exchange, with players located in his regional hubs staffing camps in exchange for payment and quick tutoring brush-ups. Even Folk, a Pro Bowler in 2007 and a counselor dating all the way back to the very first Vegas camp, still schedules private lessons whenever he's back in Los Angeles.

"Even when I give a demonstration, he gives me pointers," he says. "It's always positive criticism. I want that. If I'm stuck and not improving, someone else can pass me by."

"He's as a high level as he gets," says Blair Walsh. "He's one of those guys who knows everything about kicking. I think he would be able to be an NFL special teams coach, at least when it comes to kickers."

USC's John Baxter, the rare special teams coach who teaches kicking mechanics and handles his own evaluations, says that the proof that what Sailer and Rubio are doing works arrived in the form of Heidari, Kris Albarado, and Peter McBride back in 2011.

"We're getting as good a start with a player as you can get," he says. "That's all you can ask for."

It was inevitable that private position coaches like Sailer would market their businesses as catering to the recruiting industry, the sports equivalent of teaching to the test. If the end goal is to wind up with a scholarship—and even for special teamers, it is—it holds that parents will attack the process even more aggressively than they will the SAT, because the result is attainable, and the method is clear. It's a process as mechanistic as the one that lands Junior in a school of choice, and yet doesn't require student council meetings, mock trials, charity work, AP tests, or other resume-puffing jetsam. What a prospect needs to demonstrate the ability to earn a scholarship is a certain amount of talent, a certain amount of will, and the right form, which is earned through the kind of teaching that can be had for the right price.

While Sailer does offer payment plans and financial aid arrangements to families who can't pay the full balance of his camp fees, he's quick to acknowledge that his core clientele is, "in a sense, the golf and tennis community"—the same parents who would otherwise shell out for extended sessions with Kaplan Test

Prep. Add in the inherent shortcomings of high school special teams training, and he and Rubio have built a constituency by being able to account for both core tutoring motivations—the desire of parents to help their children meet a goal and the inability of the system to help them reach it—at once.

What they've built, and the work they've done to make kickers and punters and snappers less distinct from other football players, has had tangible effects. Special teamers aren't just earning scholarships now, but more accepted into the overall fabric of teams than they were. The pockets of community they've created at their camps have eased the sense of isolation and even loneliness that's long accompanied these jobs.

There are, though, no more iconoclastic bare-footed kickers or long snappers hiking a ball one-handed, as Rubio did as a self-taught snapper prior to his UCLA days. A basic process of evolution has gradually weeded out such inefficient techniques. What remains is unyielding sameness, the result of homogeneous processes that have made it more difficult, for better or worse, for the untrained eye to differentiate one kicker's form from another's. An almost universal standardization of motion has created a set idea of how kicking and punting are supposed to look, just as throwing a football or running a route became mechanized long ago. Kickers and punters may be more part of the team now, but they're also more like their teammates—whirring cogs in great machines.

What Sailer and Rubio have done, then, is create the conditions that make them necessary. It's an achievement in line with the greater tradition of American sports, one that's used principles of efficiency to improve the quality of play and raised the expectations for a class of player traditionally set on the game's margins, all while turning a profit. As Sailer might say, it's all part of the process.

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Art by Sam Woolley. Photos by Getty.

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